HEAVEN IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

December 22, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 2:8-15

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place.'" -Luke 2:15 (NRSV)

My topic this morning is "Heaven in Unexpected Places," and my text, in addition to the account of the nativity, the text that most set me to thinking, is from an unexpected source, one of the Christmas letters that arrived in our home last week.

What fun they are - those ubiquitous Christmas letters! Lampooned, sometimes sneered at, laughed at, often maudlin, embarrassingly personal and obviously parochial; sometimes tossed aside because they take too long to read; they almost always tell you a lot more than you want to know. They go on and on, describing events that were smashingly exciting to the participants at the moment but which, frankly, lose something in the telling six months after the fact. I confess, I used to think a little like that, reading or skimming them was a duty I owed my friends. But, I have changed. Now I love them. Now I find I read every word. Even about people I no longer remember. That happens when you move around a bit... you get on Christmas letter lists and remain on for decades and sometimes don't have a clue as to the identity of the author.

Steve and Marsha told us that Marsha is doing better after some health problems and that they had a nice vacation with her parents in Minnesota last August, that Amy quit college, Peter is into weight-lifting, and Taurie is playing soccer. And I'm not sure I know who they are.

Joe and Peggy reported that Joe is still working hard, and Peggy likes being fifty and is writing a novel.

Ann and Al have new jobs in Charlotte, are enjoying the weather and feeling grateful for friends.

Hank and Mary are too busy to sit by the fire and enjoy retirement.

Being an admirer and somewhat of a connoisseur of Christmas letters, my all-time favorite was written by good friends and was a send-up of the ritual itself...

"This is to bring you up-to-date on the Brown's this year," it began.

"David's (their outstanding high school senior) jail sentence was mercifully brief and he expects to be out by June.

"Vickie (their wonderful junior high) has a whole new set of wonderful friends at the Home for Wayward Girls.

"After the University abolished his job, John has learned some new hobbies, growing violets and reading a lot of books.

"Anne is recovering very nicely from her breakdown and is able to visit each of us weekly."

They sent it to their very best friends twenty years ago, and I'm still laughing.

They do something like that annually. This year's letter arrived yesterday, just in time. This year they traveled around the world, stopping in at Stockholm to pick up their long-awaited and richly-deserved Nobel Prize. And then they even get down to real business and talk about their new eleven-pound grandson.

Why do we do this? As a matter of fact, why all these greeting cards? Why this apparent compulsion to share the stuff of our lives at Christmas? The reason, I think, is at Christmas, we know with a peculiar clarity that life is very precious and that one of the only things you can be really sure of is that we are in it together. At Christmas we want to reach out and connect and share and celebrate the modest, mundane, sometimes embarrassing and silly content of our lives - because there is something about Christmas that reminds us how very precious and dear and once-and-for-all our lives are. And the reason Christmas does that more, say, than the Fourth of July, or Labor Day, or Ground Hog Day, is that at its heart, and in our hearts somewhere, is the certainty or the hope, or the memory of childlike faith, that what happened on Christmas was none other than the birth into this human life of ours of God's only son. In her Christmas letter Peggy wrote... "It doesn't even really matter how much or how little we believe in the religious side of Christmas - the sense of peace prevails," which may mean Peggy has become an agnostic as well as turning fifty, but I wouldn't want to try to sell that notion in the marketplace of ideas. There is more going on here than meets the eye. Of course it's

commercial. Of course we are influenced by retail merchants and advertising. Of course it is our culture at its most vulgar and materialistic. But that's not the whole picture. For hundreds of years Christmas has caused people to think more deeply about their own lives and the life of the world, to hope more hopefully and sweetly and to act more kindly. Christmas is such a big deal; Christmas sets off all this bizarre behavior such as telling virtual strangers about your trip to Montana, and your daughter's violin lessons, and you and Jennie Craig - precisely because it is about mystery and love and faith and hope: that is - it is profoundly religious.

One of the gifts I received this year tucked into a Christmas card from a friend was a poem by our country's current Poet Laureate, Joseph Brodsky, who was exiled from the Soviet Union twenty years ago. It's called December 24, 1971.

> "When it's Christmas, we're all of us Magi at the grocers all slipping and pushing...
>
> "Herod reigns but the stronger he is, the more sure, the more certain the wonder...
>
> "That's what they celebrate everywhere, for its coming push tables together!"

I loved that image - of Christmas stimulating all of us, regardless of who we are, all of us pushing our tables closer together to celebrate.

The best of the year's crop of Christmas letters came from Don and Eileen who in the past twelve months kissed the Blarney Stone, canoed in Maine, hit a deer on the New Jersey Throughway, took piano lessons and appeared in a recital with ten-year-old kids, and restored Don's 1939 Lionel Model Train.

I was really glad to receive Don and Eileen's letter, mimeographed, single-spaced on blue paper, because it was about two years ago that Don told all his friends that he had about six months to live. And so he resigned his job as an Executive with the Presbyterian Church, and he and Eileen started in to do all the things they wanted to do, sandwiched in between trips to Mayo Clinic.

This year they wrote: "The word from the doctors at Mayo Clinic is that Don's remission has lasted much longer then anyone could have expected, and because it has lasted this long, IT MAY GO ON INDEFINITELY! That sentence was in large capital letters, punctuated with an exclamation mark. "The flip side," they quipped, "is that he really should go back to work."

And finally, the text of this sermon:

> "1991 has increased our understanding of the sheer joy of being alive... The future is still unpredictable and largely uncontrollable. But the life we have today is good and we are grateful. Heaven continues to be found in unexpected places."

It's true, of course. It is one of the major motifs of our religion... "Heaven in unexpected places." One of our oldest stories sets the tone: Jacob falls asleep one night at a place called Bethel, has a wonderful dream, wakes up the next morning and says, "Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it." We are not very good at seeing, knowing, acknowledging the presence of God in this world. We've redesigned the nativity to conform to the standards of Hallmark and in the process missed the point that it was the least likely place for a King to be born. It was a most unexpected place for heaven to appear. Peggy Shriver visited the site in modern Bethlehem where the birth is believed to have happened and wrote:

> "The manger!
> So unlike our church-lawn creche back home.
> This low and smoky cave
> enforces bowing of the knees
> before the shelf of dirt
> Where God knows who was born.
> Sheep and cattle shared this acrid space:
> Here - in this dirt - simple void
> the issue must be joined
> between humanity and God."
> [Pinches of Salt, "Anno Domini"]

That motif continues in his adult life. The unlikely circumstances of his birth in that common, poor stable, are consistent with the man the baby became, and the Gospel he proclaimed. He is the unexpected - the unlikely... "a stumbling block," St. Paul called him.

His contemporaries obviously expected someone else. Even his closest friends could never quite get used to the idea that he was the anointed one of God. The history of Christian thought is essentially the story of scholars struggling with this unlikely proposition... God in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth - Palestinian Jew, of all things.

At various times some German religionists have stumbled over his Jewishness, very much wanting him to be an Aryan, teaching, during one of the silliest moments of the Nazi era, that his earthly father was a Roman soldier - from Germany.

Many people stumbled over his humility. A British businessman actually wrote a book arguing that his family was really quite wealthy, his disciples were men of influence and culture, and that Jesus was actually British, Mary's mother, his grandma, having come from Cornwall. [Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter, p. 55]

I suppose what we are most likely to stumble over - what for us is most unexpected - is his powerlessness. Like the Magi, we would be inclined to look for the King in Herod's palace, not a stable.

To be God for us means to be strong and powerful and in control and to make things come out right. And our consistent, year-round struggle with religion has its roots in what the theologians call "the scandal of particularity," the enigma of Jesus the Christ.

How could God do this? Become so vulnerable?... born into our midst in the same way each and every one of us entered the world? Why would God's son be poor? Why and how could he allow himself to be ignored, opposed, arrested, tortured, executed? If God is God - if this is God's son - why did that happen?

It is our theological dilemma, is it not? And it has a way of coming to the surface at Christmas. If God is good, if God is love, if God is God - why do people suffer? Why wars? Why HIV positive? Why malignancy and child abuse and racial prejudice? Why doesn't God make it all right?

The only answer there is, is the answer of Christmas and that unexpected birth in that unlikely place. God came into the world as love, not as power, coercion, judgment - but love. God, being God, could have made us perfect; but we would not be free. God could have made a perfect world, with no suffering, sickness, war, but it would not be free. God could have created us with faith and belief already built in, but then we would never have learned to trust and to have faith and to love. Frederick Buechner wrote:

> God does not want us related to Him as a machine to an engineer, or pawns to a cosmic (chess player). God wants us related to Him as children to a father (or mother). In other words God wants us to love him, and if love is to be spontaneous and real, we must be free also not to love him." [The Faces of Jesus, p. 54]

So we are free. And God comes to save us by becoming vulnerable; by becoming subject to that same wonderful and terrible

freedom which allows accidents to happen, and tumors to be malignant and babies to be born unloved and an only son to end up on a cross.

> "The Christ child has only the power of love," Buechner wrote, "which is of all powers the most powerful because it alone can conquer the human heart: at the same time it is of all powers the most powerless, because it can do nothing except by consent."

We know the truth of that, I believe. Even if we couldn't begin to articulate a theology of incarnation, we know the truth of love. Even if, like my friend Peggy, we don't believe much about the religious side of Christmas, we know the ultimate truth of love's power and love's vulnerability.

We seem to know, all of us, whether we are confessing Christians or not, that this baby, born in this unexpected place, represents truth and beauty and our best hope and the best hope of the world.

We get caught up in it because this baby, like any baby, "does not judge us, or make us feel guilty, or ask us to do things, or threaten to punish us." [Buechner] Unlike most of the religious structures with which we are familiar, this baby doesn't ask anything of us. All this baby does is show up expressing God's love and the precious miracle that is life itself.

Peggy Shriver's poem, which I cited earlier, concludes:

> "Here - in this dirt simple void -
> the issue must be joined
> between humanity and God.
> All tinsel, trees and trappings
> of two thousand holidays aside,
> all incantations, vestments, hymns
> suspended.
> If God be born here
> in this child,
> no human birth disqualifies
> as child of God."

This child, born in this unexpected place, makes each of us a child of God. And it is for that - that almost indescribable sense that Christmas is about the sacredness of human life; the holiness of our lives, yours and mine; our own precious lives blessed somehow by his being born - it is for that, I think, that we reach out to each other and exchange greetings and tell about our summer vacations and violin lessons and hopes and dreams. It is for that, I think, that we are willing to share and celebrate

the precious gift of life and to try haltingly, to say to one another: "Your life is holy, precious; we are God's gifts to one another. We really are in this together for a brief period of time, and our best hope is to know that, and rejoice in each other, and love each other." That's what Christmas letters and Christmas cards are trying to say. And our being here this morning is a way of trying to say something for which most of us have no words, stumbling theologically to say to the God who created us all and in the midst of human history orchestrated the Bethlehem birth: "I love you for that and I trust you and know now - that you are in this with me and will never leave me."

So join your voices with shepherds and angels and wisemen; join your voices with those you love and hold dear - and with whom it is important for you to share and celebrate your life; join your voices with Don and Eileen - who said it so simply for me this year:

> "The future is unpredictable ... uncontrollable. But the life we have today is good. Heaven continues to be found in unexpected places."

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Lord our God, for the gift of life, we give thanks. For the gifts of people to care for, we give thanks. For the mystery of your love, expressed in the birth of Jesus our Lord, we give thanks. Amen.